

## Something he isn't by MsMrs

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Gen

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven (Stranger Things) (Mentioned), Holly Wheeler (mentioned), Jonathan Byers (mentioned), Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler (mentioned), Ted Wheeler

**Relationships:** Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair (minor), Will Byers & Dustin Henderson & Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

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**Summary:**

Eleven vanished in November of 1983, never to be seen again.

Almost two years later, Will has gotten over the memories and flashbacks, all while watching his best friend falling apart. Now, he has to deal with the aftermath of Mike's latest aggressive outburst.

Or: Ted Wheeler is a major asshole.

Rated Teen and Up for swearing.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

Okay, well... here we are.

I'm kinda sorry I tortured Mike but... you know, he and Will are just too cute together when one of them is hurting. If the summary hasn't made it clear enough:

- Alternate Universe

- Eleven is gone

- The whole Mind Flayer thing never happened

- Will has gotten over his flashbacks on his own (maybe through therapy, who knows?)

- Max has come to Hawkins in 1984 and she's dating Lucas, though the Lumax in this is very minor

- Dustin and Steve are hinted to be friends for some reason (how could this have happened without Dart?)

A fair word of warning: I think it's just so damn prosaic. Mainly, because English isn't my native language. If you can deal with that, have fun I guess? Also, chapter length varies a bit too much for my taste.

Just to have my self-criticism out of the way. It's the first thing I've written, and now I need a break. Not as much as poor Mike does, though.

Btw, I'm finished with this, so I'm gonna dump it all at once. I'm not one for posting a chapter a week, because I'd literally NEVER finish it.

The heat was unbearable. For weeks, the little town of Hawkins had been frying in the summer sun, its citizens either taking as many days off work as they could afford to relax at home, or working extra shifts to enjoy the air conditioned goodness of their workplace. Joyce Byers did the latter, working at Melvald's General Store from sunrise until the late evening hours. Jonathan was out of the house too, most of the time. It was 1985, his last summer at home before college, and he

was determined to make as much money as possible to ease the transition for both himself and his family.

Will, on the other hand, didn't have a job or anything besides his friends to keep himself busy, but for the last few days the sun had burned in a way that had made it impossible to meet up with Max, Dustin and Lucas. He would have only gone outside to see Mike. Will wouldn't be able to see his best friend for another week though, so he had, more or less, decided to stay inside for the day.

He spent some time inspecting the sunburn on his arms and legs, peeling little bits of skin off occasionally. He flinched at every touch, but he was getting better.

*That's what you get for brushing off your mom's advice about sunscreen.*

Self-pity really wasn't one of Will's traits, so he took some time to practice drawing and painting. He was still struggling with getting trees right, and now was as good a time as any to improve on this. All the little details managed to captivate him enough to forget about the heat and the pain for a while. Still, his thought wandered off more than once. Wandered off to Mike, from whom he hadn't heard in a month. He could only hope the weather in Ohio was at least a little bit more manageable. For the past four weeks, Will had often stayed up at night, wondering how his friend might feel. During the first week, he and Dustin had gotten in a terrible argument with Lucas that could have ended their friendship for good, with Lucas arguing this whole thing could actually be good for Mike. Even Max had taken Will's side in the argument eventually, but reluctantly. She had tried not to comment on Mike, since she hadn't known him before things had gone to shit for him.

Will had, of course, been aware of Mike's deteriorating behavior ever

since late 1983. He had basically been a wreck. For a long time, Will had left his Supercom tuned to channel five at night, and listened to Mike's messages to the girl only called ,Eleven', his heart breaking a bit more with each hoarse sob. Day 300... day 400... he hadn't reached day 500. Mike had made his last call on day 439, and while Will had slowly gotten over his flashbacks to the terrible, hellish dimension of eternal night, Mike had fallen apart.

He had never been alone. Not by any means. Will had made sure to offer him a helping hand on every possible occasion, and so had Dustin and Lucas. Still, their friendship hadn't been enough. Mike had failed classes and barely made it through Middle School. He had skipped school. He had gotten into fights, to a point where Chief Hopper had to step in. While Mike's parents never knew the truth, they grew more and more desperate. Karen Wheeler did, at least. Ted Wheeler had just went from uncaring, to disappointed, to angry, to outraged, to merciless.

Still lost in thought about how unfair everything had been for Mike, close to blaming himself for everything again, Will peeked up at the sound of his Supercom crackling. Dustin's voice came through the small speaker. He was clearly excited, but still stuck with the somewhat infantile radio codes they had used as kids.

„This is Bard, calling Cleric and Ranger. I'm transmitting this on all channels. Code blue. I repeat, code blue. If this concerns you, channel three will be used for replies. Over.“

Will's heart made a leap. It couldn't be. It was a week too early. He immediately made a jump for the Supercom and turned to channel three, impatiently waiting for more information. When he didn't hear anything for a minute, he finally had enough.

„Dustin! This is Will. Are you sure? Are you one hundred percent sure?“ he yelped.

„This is Bard. Please stay clear of this channel if you don't know the correct codes. Over.“

Will rolled his eyes and sighed.

„This is Cleric, calling Bard and Ranger. Seriously, Dustin, I'm gonna rip your balls off if you don't tell me what's going on! Fucking Over!“ he grunted.

Before Dustin answered, there was another voice.

„This is Ranger, and this is the last time I'm playing along with this shit. You better tell us now if you're sure. Over.“ Lucas snapped, sounding pretty much as on-edge as Will was feeling.

„Code blue confirmed.“ Dustin said „Paladin is back in Neverwinter. Paladin is back in Neverwinter, this is not a drill. Over.“

„How do you know? It's too early!“ Will hastily inquired.

There was slight commotion on the other side. Dustin had pressed the Talk-button but was now shuffling through a bunch of papers.

„Uh...“ he stuttered „Rogue told... shit where is my... I've written it down somewhere... I... ugh. You know what, fuck this shit. This is too stupid, even for me. Nancy told Steve, Steve told me. That alright with you? Can't remember what code we assigned to him.“

„I’m on my way.“ Will exclaimed, already looking for a shirt to put on.

„Don’t get your hopes up.“ Dustin sighed „His parents want him to spend some time with the family until at least tomorrow. Nancy said we’d be welcome by four in the afternoon.“

With that, Will’s shoulders lumped and he sank back to the floor, suddenly feeling the heat twice as exhausting as before.

„Have you at least heard how he’s feeling?“ Lucas asked, a hint of guilt creeping up in his voice.

He probably knew his friends hadn’t forgotten about their argument.

„Well, he’s alive, obviously.“ Dustin replied „If we wanna know more, we gotta wait until tomorrow. Can’t be too bad, right?“

„Yeah...“ Will said with less certainty than he would have liked „Uh... Lucas, you better tell Max. She’ll want to be there too, right?“

„I guess.“ Lucas muttered „But I don’t know if he’ll want her in his house. They’re not... close, you know.“

„We’re gonna take her along anyways.“ Will decided with a determined voice „They’re friends and if he’s better... god, I hope he’s at least not worse... uh... if he’s better it could be good for him to meet her.“

Will and Lucas both agreed, and after that, there was only silence. No further talks about Mike or the next day. Will turned off the Supercom, with only the hope for at least slightly lower temperatures, and the anticipation of finally seeing his best friend again, remaining.

## 2. Chapter 2

The next day, at four in the afternoon, the heat had become at least somewhat bearable. Somewhat. But, Will was looking forward to seeing Mike. He, Dustin and Lucas were standing on the Wheelers' doorstep, anxiously stepping from one foot to the other while waiting for someone to answer the door.

Max had excused herself. Will couldn't possibly know if her supposed dentist appointment was just pretext, but he assumed it. He'd talk to her about this later, now it wasn't important though.

The only thing that mattered was Mike's face that suddenly appeared in the widening crack between door and door frame. Even though he was grinning, a moment of silence ensued between the boys. He looked different. Of course, he was recognizable as Mike, but at the same time, he was a completely different person.

No Star Wars shirt. Instead, Mike was wearing a short sleeved button-down shirt and short jeans. This was something Will could have imagined Mike wearing even before his absence, but what was really striking was the haircut. Mike's hair was short. Not mercilessly short, but short enough to lose its curls. There was really nothing unruly about his new haircut. Still, it wasn't too conforming either. Not that Mike had ever actively tried to be a nonconformist. He had just always been himself. This, however, didn't look like him. Will could only imagine Mike hadn't consented to this. But, what was important above anything else, Mike was smiling.

When Dustin finally broke the silence by simply saying „Hi“, Will launched himself at Mike, pulling him into a short, tight hug. Lucas and Dustin followed.



„So...“ Mike said slowly, still grinning „I’m back. And we got two weeks of summer left before school starts. High School...”

„Easy there.“ Dustin snorted „Before we talk about plans for the future, I wanna know how...”

Ted Wheeler’s voice, coming from the living room, cut him short.

„Michael. Are your friends here?”

Will noticed, with a fair bit of concern, how Mike’s whole posture stiffened at the sound of his father’s voice. The grin immediately vanished from his face.

„Yes, dad!” he yelled back „Can we go to the basement? It’s cooler than my room.”

„Go ahead.“ Mr. Wheeler said, followed by the sound of him shuffling through a newspaper or magazine.

„Let’s go downstairs.“ Mike said, showing his teeth again.

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*„You are here because you’ve become a burden! A burden to your parents, a burden to your friends, if there are any left, and a burden to society. Let me tell you this, I’m not gonna sit and watch, waiting for you shitheads to go to jail, just so you get three meals a day on taxpayer money! Not on my watch! I’ve got five weeks to turn you into valuable members of society, and, mark my words, I’m going to succeed! I’ve always succeeded!*

*Hard times create strong men, so I'm gonna send you through hard times! You're gonna hate me two days from now, but ten years from now, you're gonna be on your knees, kissing my ass! Understood?"*

*„Yes..."*

*„The fuck was that? If you pieces of crap open your mouths, the first and the last word I wanna hear is ‚Sir‘! Understood?"*

*„Sir, yes, Sir!"*

*Mike gulped. This wouldn't be easy. He'd just have to play along and hope for the best.*

*„Weak! But don't worry, we're gonna fix that in no time. First we'll get you some decent haircuts. Cabin five. Wait in line! Up and away!"*

*.. ... ..*

Mike was right. The basement was actually pretty nice, even during this brutal summer. The couch was still there, so were most of the chairs and their D&D table. Only the pillow fort was missing. Mike had never had the heart to finally tear it down, even after he had grown too tall to fit inside. His parents had probably taken care of that, but Will took the fact that he hadn't rebuilt it as a good sign. Maybe, he could move on now, or, at least, begin to move on.

*„Sit down wherever you want." Mike said, pulling himself a chair towards the couch „Why didn't you bring Max?"*

*„She's got an appointment with the dentist." Lucas said, matter-of-factly.*

Dustin chuckled

„I think she didn't want to come.“

Lucas shot him an evil stare but he went on

„Don't hold it against her. She just... never knew how to deal with...“

Lucky for him, he didn't have to complete the sentence. Mike nodded, saying

„...with me. Listen, guys... I wanna get this out of the way first. I'm sorry. Really. You've put up with my shit for almost two years.“

With every word Mike spoke, Will felt relief washing through his mind. If things were really getting better now, maybe it had been worth it. Whatever ,it' had been. That was what he really wanted to ask Mike.

„Nothing to be sorry for.“ he solemnly said „But I'm kinda curious now. I've seen these boot camps on TV. Looked pretty shitty. How was it?“

For a moment, Mike's gaze wandered off.

„It was... kinda tough...“ he sighed „I mean... really tough. The warden was some retired Army Sergeant, so... you know, lots of yelling. But at least decent beds and food. We were... like... twenty guys and, I mean, ten beds in one cabin isn't ideal but... I survived.“

Will nodded.

„Yeah, I figured that much. I guess they forced you to do sports and stuff. Was the heat in Ohio as bad as here?“

Mike shrugged in response.

„If you suffered as much as I do now...“ he said, wiping sweat from his forehead „...it wasn't as bad. Lake Erie was basically in viewing distance. That cooled the air down I think. But yeah, it was pretty hot.“

He couldn't help it, Will felt sorry for Mike, even though he was seemingly doing so well. He really looked better than he had ever looked since November of 1983, so why was Will still so worried about his friend? Maybe, because the smile never quite managed to reach his eyes? No, probably not it, but Lucas and Dustin sure looked a lot more enthusiastic about everything than Will felt.

„Guess I gotta apologize.“ Dustin mumbled in Lucas' direction „You were right.“

Lucas shook his head but Mike frowned.

„Wrong about what?“ he asked curiously.

Lucas let out a long sigh. He didn't look like he wanted Mike to know, but now he had no choice.

„About a week after you were gone... well, I just didn't want to put up with Will's and Dustin's plans of breaking you out of that supposed shithole, so I told them it could... kinda... be good for you. Jeez, I'm sorry, Mike. I'm not your parents and I had no right to...“

Suddenly, Mike had a firm grip on Lucas' shoulder that made him abort mid sentence.

„Don't apologize.“ he firmly said „I didn't like it. Honestly, I hated it. But it's over. I'm fine, so just forget it, okay? I knew all along I was giving you all a hard time, but that's over too, I promise. No further shenanigans from this idiot.“

With a wide grin that, again, didn't include his eyes, he pointed both thumbs at himself.

„It's over...“ Dustin slowly said „Which brings me to my next question. Why? It was supposed to be five weeks.“

To Will's surprise, Mike laughed. It looked and sounded like he could barely contain his laughter, not even for his response.

„This kid... Daryl...“ he snickered „...well, we were supposed to cook for ourselves once a day for dinner and... shit... he kinda set the kitchen on fire and burned the whole cabin down.“

Will saw his own expression of disbelief mirrored on Dustin's and Lucas' faces. Mike had taken to holding his convulsing stomach, shedding one or two tears and suddenly, all three began laughing louder than they had since his departure. Finally, there was no nervous tension left between them, and Will was almost convinced everything would be alright.

„It was so bad they had to shut the place down until September or October and by then the camp season's gonna be over.“ Mike chuckled, having caught his breath „Sarge was mighty pissed. They called all our parents, but we had to stay for the night. Guess who didn't get to sleep?“

The others didn't have to guess, and never got a chance to because Mike quickly said

„Seriously, I woke up at... like... four in the morning and Sarge was still screaming at the guy, and he was still running around the cabin. Waking time was five in the morning and by then he was sleeping in the mud.“

„We shouldn't be laughing.“ Lucas gasped „This must have been hell for him.“

„Yeah... but it wasn't me.“ Mike said through his bursts of laughter, and Will agreed.

Mike had gone through a tough time. But it was over. Nothing could have made him happier.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so... dumping is not a good idea.  
Looks like it triggers the spam filter so, I guess Kudos  
to the Admins! And I'm gonna take it a bit slower.

Five days later, Will was pretty much content. He didn't know a better word for it. Summer break still wasn't over, and things were going just fine. Granted, Mike's curfew had been set to seven in the evening for the rest of the summer, but that was just supposed to be a 'probation period' as his father had put it. None of the boys enjoyed this, mainly because the days were still so hot that you could only really have fun in the evening, but they didn't complain. To some degree, it was even understandable, considering the final straw that had caused Mike's parents to take action, one and a half months earlier.

After all, Mike had broken Troy's nose, and that was no small thing. Lucky for him, Troy had given him a black eye immediately after that, so neither family was keen to press charges, though Will figured, Chief Hopper would have tried to talk them out of it anyways. He didn't know the Chief too well, but it would fit him. He wasn't one for putting kids in jail or counseling, and the way things had worked out, Will was satisfied.

Troy had been a rare sight around town for the first few weeks, probably because he was utterly humiliated by 'Frog Face Wheeler' knocking him out. After that, however, he didn't miss and opportunity to give Will, Dustin and Lucas a hard time. To their immense relief, he kept his distance though.

*Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never harm me.*

This wasn't entirely true, of course, none of them liked being called names, but the fact that Troy had lost his sticks and stones over threats of boarding school, at least that was the rumor, was good enough for them. The other guy, James, didn't try anything serious either and the way he looked at Troy nowadays made it clear that power structures between them had changed.

All that wasn't affected by Mike's return. His best friend rarely ever took notice of Troy or James when they came across them in town, but when he did, he just put on a smile that almost oozed of superiority. It never led to a physical argument. As far as Will, Lucas, Dustin and Max were concerned, things looked even better for them than they had before 1983.

Concerning Max, the dentist appointment had been a real thing. As it turned out, she needed braces, which seemed a minor catastrophe to her, considering the group was about to start High School. Her appointment to get them fitted was set for their first weekend after the summer break, so it was no wonder she had taken to devouring every last bit of candy she could get her hands on. Especially the things she wouldn't be supposed to eat with the braces on. She had made it more than clear that she'd miss popcorn the most, so Mike had decided to invite the whole party to the movies that afternoon.

It was in everyone's best interest really, not only because they desperately wanted to see „Back to the Future“. The theater was air conditioned and the harsh sunlight wouldn't get to them for two hours.

„Popcorn's on me.“ Dustin declared in the lobby, and Lucas shot him a grateful gaze.

He had confided with the other boys how hard Max's new found



candy habits were on his wallet, because a good boyfriend was supposed to pay for this stuff. Dustin handed him enough money to treat everyone with a medium sized bag, and as he wandered off to get soda, Will saw his chance. He pulled Mike by the elbow, practically dragging him into a corner.

„So.“ he said.

„So?“ Mike repeated in anticipation.

„You're pretty relaxed around Max these days.“ Will stated „I know she came over to talk to you alone last week. You mind telling me about it?“

Mike just shrugged.

„There wasn't really a lot to it.“ he admitted „I kinda had to stop her apologizing, to be honest. Don't tell anyone, I think it doesn't fit her... uh... image... but she was actually pretty regretful. That's... bullshit, if you ask me. I treated her like shit sometimes. We kinda thought of each other as friends but we were just... a bit like sandpaper on each other, really. I didn't want her to replace... you know who... and she didn't understand how I could make such a fuzz about...“

„Sorry!“ Will quickly said with a small sting in his side „I didn't want to go there. Really.“

„All good.“ Mike reassured him „These last months it wasn't even about... Eleven... anymore.“

Will noticed how painfully slow he pressed the ‚name‘ through his teeth.

„I think I got all this frustration from there, but then I got used to it. That was the problem.“

Will sighed and patted Mike’s arm reassuringly.

„It’s okay now. You already told me more than I wanted to know. Let’s just... enjoy the movie, right? Let the past rest.“ he quietly said.

„Yeah.“ Mike agreed „It’s over. I’m just gonna focus on things I actually can look forward to now.“

They met with the rest of the group again, and as they all were headed for the theater, Will couldn’t help but wonder why he had been so worried about Mike. It looked like this whole boot camp thing had really had a positive effect on him, even if it was four weeks of hell.

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„One... two... three... Faster! Four... five... I want your lazy asses to give me fifty!“

*Mike suppressed a groan. He had never been good at push-ups, but he forced himself to ignore the pain in his upper arms. Ignore the mud. Ignore the heat. Ignore the yelling Sergeant. Just focus on the work that had to be done. He just couldn’t be the first one to give in. Mike had seen it in the movies. The first one would always get screamed at the worst, and he couldn’t let that happen to him on his second day.*

*After ten more painful repeats, he heard a splattering sound somewhere to*

*his left, and immediately, the Sarge raised his voice.*

*„What the hell do you think you're doing, Schwartz? Fifteen! That was fifteen! Get your ass up right now and give me thirty-five more!“*

*A weak, almost inaudible voice appeared, heavily panting.*

*„...can't...“*

*„What was that supposed to be? An answer?“*

*„Sir... I can't... Sir“*

*„Pathetic! Ten laps around cabin three! Up and away!“*

*Out of the corner of his eyes, Mike could see the boy get up and run towards the cabin where his bed was located. Immediately, another ‚camp counselor‘, as they were called, was by his side, mercilessly yelling at him to go faster.*

*Dungeon Master would have better described these ex Army guys.*

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Through the entire movie, Will's gaze was constantly shifting between Mike and the screen. Half way in, he had already decided, this was one of his favorite movies ever. At some points, he had to press his hand to his stomach to stop himself from exploding into loud laughter, and at others, he just cringed at the awkwardness of some situations, especially between Marty McFly and his mother.

Mike didn't show his emotions as outright as Will did, but he looked like he was enjoying himself quite a bit too.

The attention Lucas and Max could have paid to the movie was seemingly lost to each other, and who could blame them. They probably rarely ever got a chance to be alone in the dark, and here they were at least in the dark. Out of the group, the only one really getting into the movie as much as Will, was Dustin, who was shoveling popcorn into his mouth like there was no tomorrow, occasionally choking something up again at particularly funny moments.

For Will's taste, it was over just way too quickly and the open ending left him in a state of almost painful anticipation. How long until the sequel? Soon wouldn't be soon enough, that much was sure. Dustin whole heartedly agreed to that, already lost in contemplation about what could possibly be wrong with Marty's and Jennifer's children.

„Probably time travel trouble...“ he said, while they just passed the hardware store „What do you think, Wheeler?“

Mike jumped a bit, looking startled, and, for a second, even afraid. He quickly relaxed though, and sighed.

„I... uh... I don't know...“ he stuttered „Maybe they're... in debt or something.“

Max burst out in laughter behind them, with Lucas holding her. Will, however, wasn't in the mood for laughing. He waited for Dustin to direct his attention to something else and then whispered in Mike's direction

„What was that?“

Mike turned his head and held Will's concerned stare for a second.

„What do you mean?“ he finally asked.

„Don't give me that.“ Will grunted „You know exactly what.“

His friend chewed on his bottom lip for a second, and put on a calm, reassuring smile.

„Was kinda lost in thought there.“ he bluntly said „Don't worry, I'm good.“

But Will did worry, but only as long as his schedule allowed it.

## 4. Chapter 4

The first week of High School had gone by in a blur. Will's head was still spinning, not only from the new subjects he had to learn for now, but also from all the change around him. It wasn't only the fact that he now was in class with people he didn't know most of the time. Jonathan was gone, off to New York with Nancy Wheeler. Pretty much everyone from the class of 1985 was gone. Will's house felt empty now. He had been alone a lot pretty much through his entire childhood, but it was just so different now. Just the knowledge that his brother wouldn't be home for dinner made things harder. Lonelier.

He resorted to the only thing he could think of; Spending time with the party. More than ever. Some days, when he came home particularly late, he felt bad for leaving his mom alone so long. He knew full well, she didn't cope well with her eldest being out of the house, be it out of loneliness or because she felt like she was aging.

Pretty much from day one, Mike primarily concentrated on homework, which was something he hadn't done in a long time. He really put it before anything else, though Will was immensely grateful that his friend always made time to welcome him and the party in his basement, where they'd study together and occasionally play a game, though, this was rare. High School wasn't as easy going as Middle School had been.

After a month however, the visits to Mike's house were becoming increasingly rare, even to a point where the party only saw him at school and on the weekends, during which he would almost always be busy studying too. 'Catching up' was all he said when asked about it, and while Will couldn't really complain about his best friend trying to get his life in order, he always woke up with a certain, painful longing in his insides. Things would never go back to the way

they used to be, and he'd just have to accept that. But the lack of contact with Mike really got to him. The gap between them was growing. It was a slow process, but painful nonetheless.

Even during times with less homework, it wouldn't get any better.

So, Will finally found himself on the Wheelers' doorstep on a Wednesday in early November, ringing the doorbell twice. He was glad it was Mike who opened. He wouldn't have had a problem with Karen Wheeler, but he hated talking to Mike's dad, if you could call interaction with him ,talking' anyways.

„Will.“ Mike muttered, looking and sounding somewhat absent.  
„What's up?“

„Who's that?“ Ted Wheeler yelled from the living room.

Will felt strangely reminded of the day Mike had come back from the boot camp in Ohio. Once again, he stiffened, even flinched slightly, before answering

„It's Will. Can he come in?“

Before last summer, he just would have let Will in, but it seemed like, this wasn't how it worked anymore at the Wheeler house.

„Only for half an hour.“ his father firmly said „Then it's back to homework.“

„Yes, Sir.“ Mike said, opening the door completely to let Will in.

„Can't we go to your room?“ Will inquired, when he saw that Mike was headed for the basement door. „It's pretty cold already.“

Mike stared at him for a second, but then nodded slowly and went for the stairs.

Mike's room was a familiar sight, of course. Not the largest in the house, but cozy. A full size bed, his desk with the lamp that always emitted nice, warm light, his Star Wars...

That was the catch. His model of the Millennium Falcon was sitting on top of the white dresser as always, but all other Star Wars references were gone. All things that reminded of hobbies or passions had vanished. The walls were eerily empty. Where posters had been located just months earlier, now only white wallpaper was visible. No toys were left in the room except the Supercom on Mike's bed, which wasn't really a toy, to be honest.

„Mike, what happened here?“ Will gasped.

His question was followed by a long silence. Mike's expression was blank, and only his eyes showed that he was struggling through an internal fight.

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*A week. Only a week had passed. Spending ten hours a day running, doing push-ups, carrying heavy logs of wood, it had felt like a lifetime to Mike. By day three, the realization that he was really stuck at this place had come to his mind, and it hadn't been a pleasant one. He knew, for another month, his life would revolve around intimidation and hard labor, and he didn't know if he could stand it. So far, there hadn't been any of those 'team building activities' that had been praised in the brochure his father had brought home one evening, quite the opposite.*



*„Wheeler? What do you think you're doing?“*

*Mike felt sick to the bone, not only because of exhaustion, but because the Sarge had noticed him. That was never a good thing.*

*„Sir, Jumping Jacks, Sir!“*

*He was panting heavily, the words barely leaving his throat.*

*„Bullshit! You're trying to make fun of me, right?“*

*„Sir, no, Sir!“*

*At this point, a wave of panic was forming in Mike's stomach.*

*„Shit! Did you hear that?“*

*The Sarge turned to the other boys, who were all trying their best to keep the speed up.*

*„Wheeler just talked back to me! You know what kind of people talk back to their Sergeant? Commies! And that's why they don't get shit done. Are you a Commie, Wheeler?“*

*Mike could feel the tears stinging in the corners of his eyes, but he was determined not to cry. What was he supposed to say? Two options, both equally wrong.*

*„Sir, no, Sir!“*

*„Well, fuck me! He did it again! To the front, Wheeler!“*

*Mike stopped his jumping, and, allowing himself no rest, went to the front, facing the others. He could almost feel the vibrating air as the Sarge screamed.*

*„Into the mud! Down! Face down!“*

*Mike complied, keeping his mouth and eyes shut as firmly as he could.*

*„Up!“*

*Mike did as he was told.*

*„Down!“*

*He complied.*

*„Up!“*

*Mike stood up again, every bone in his body aching.*

*„Jumping Jacks! Now!“*

*Mike gave his best to do the exercise as on spot as possible. He felt as though he could throw up any moment.*

*„If you're not a Commie, I bet you know the national anthem, right?“*

*„Sir, yes, Sir!“*

*Mike could only croak through the mud covering his face.*

*„Then sing! And because Wheeler talked back to me, all you lazy shits give me fifty more!“*

*No one groaned or complained, but Mike could see some stares being exchanged.*

*It was okay. His face was full of mud. No one could see he was crying as he began to sing.*

*-... .. - ... .. -... .. -... .. - ... ..*

„Mike? What happened here?“ Will asked again, this time more carefully.

„I... uh... got rid of a lot of stuff. My dad told me to give it to Goodwill, you know. Probably already in some thrift store. I guess I kinda grew out of that phase.“ he muttered.

„Grew out of it.“ Will repeated, as skeptical as he could be.

That didn't fit Mike at all. Not even the old Mike, the Mike he had known before the events exactly two years ago. For the first time since the summer, Will had a grasp on what had been bothering him in the back corner of his mind the whole time. However, as soon as he tried to reach out for it, and get the realization into his consciousness, it slipped through his fingers. Mike was still Mike, that much was sure. But in some ways, he wasn't.

It was impossible to get another word regarding his lost hobbies out of Mike, so Will decided, it was best to let the topic rest for now. Realistically speaking, there was nothing he could do about it. It wouldn't hurt to just wait until Christmas and New Year's. If Mike didn't make at least some room in his schedule to meet his friends during the holidays, they'd all confront him about it together. One thing was sure though, Will wouldn't give up on their friendship without putting up a fight.

## 5. Chapter 5

November had been tough, but everyone managed to get through it. December had barely started, and once again, things were looking good for Will. Jonathan had called to tell his family he'd be home for the holidays, which meant that Will spent the days in anticipation of Christmas even more than usual. He tried not to lose his grip on the harsh reality that was High School though. There were history dates to learn, tests to take and essays to write, and all in all, this managed to keep him busy. So much even, that he rarely spent another thought on Mike's behavior. He had talked to Lucas, Dustin and Max about his concerns once or twice, but they too were too entangled in the tentacles of that merciless homework monster the teachers had unleashed to care a lot.

Walking up to his locker, Will heard an all too familiar voice. Troy, who had left the party alone most of the time since last summer, was standing next to Mike.

*Don't do anything stupid. Please!*

Will sincerely hoped, Mike wouldn't allow that idiot to provoke him again. So far, the two had only met when Mike was around other party members, and maybe that helped, so Will quickly jumped to his side.

„Hey, Wheeler. Look what we got there. It's your boyfriend, isn't that nice?“ Troy sneered with a triumphant grin.

Mike, however, didn't even look at Troy. He merely huffed while exchanging books from his bag with books from the locker in preparation of his afternoon classes. Will was ninety percent sure,

Troy wouldn't try anything. He had remained a loudmouth, but the tiger had lost his claws, so to speak. Especially now, that James had all but abandoned him. Though maybe, there was a plan behind this, and that was a thought too terrifying for Will to bear. Rumor was, Troy's parents had threatened to send him to boarding school if he got into another fight, but he also knew what consequences Mike had faces in the summer. What if he was trying to get Mike to punch him again, in front of a bunch of witnesses who would, of course, say Troy hadn't initiated the fight. Just a perfect way to get Mike in trouble.

Thinking about that, Will was relieved to see, Mike wouldn't fall for it. He sternly ignored Troy's teasing.

„I said...” Troy ranted on „Your boyfriend is here, Wheeler. Don't worry, you can make it official. By now, everyone knows you're a queer. Fucking fairy.“

.....

*Pain... so much pain... Mike's entire body felt like he had been hit with sledgehammers all over. It had been like this every night he went to sleep for the last three weeks, and it hadn't really been better in the mornings either.*

*What made things worse was, how much the Sarge and the ,counselors' were gunning for him. He just couldn't do anything right.*

„Faster, Wheeler!“

„Get your ass up, Wheeler!“

„Are you a fucking fairy, Wheeler?“

„Don't talk back, Wheeler!“

*„Fifty more, because Wheeler can't do as he's told!“*

*„...because of Wheeler's insubordination!“*

*„...Wheeler's fault!“*

*„...complain to Wheeler!“*

*With the thought that this really didn't make him popular with the other boys, he stepped into the cabin after his shower. He immediately knew he was in deep shit. The light was off, and in the darkness eight grim faces were staring at him. A ninth face appeared next to him, and the boy it belonged to slammed the door shut.*

*„We've had it with your shit, Wheeler.“*

*„You're getting us all in trouble.“*

*„Yeah. You're making life a living Hell for us.“*

*Mike was completely unprepared for the first punch that hit him. All air had been knocked out of him, and there was nothing he could do but sink to his knees and press both hands against his stomach. Coughing, he could feel hands grabbing his arms from behind, dragging him back to his feet. Still, he was trying to hold back the tears. From there on, the eight remaining boys took turns, one punch each. It probably didn't take a long time, most likely less than a minute, but when it was over, Mike was reduced to a sobbing mess on the floor. Showing no weakness was not an option, and certainly not a priority anymore. There was only pain. Pain, far worse than his aching limbs. He curled up in a ball and closed his eyes.*

*„Will you do as you're told now?“*

*„...yes...“*

*He could only press the response through his teeth, his voice high pitched and unnaturally weak.*

*„Sir, yes, Sir.“*

*Some of the others chuckled at that, but Mike repeated it, fearing it might get worse if he didn't.*

*„Sir... yes... Sir...“*

*Seemingly satisfied with their work, everyone hurried to their beds. Mike didn't. He remained on the floor, quietly sobbing to himself until he was sure everyone was asleep, before crawling into his bed.*

*For the first, but not for the last time, he silently cried himself to sleep.*

*You deserve this.*

*.. - .--- .. ... - ... .- .--- .- . - .*

For a critical few seconds, Mike clenched his teeth and Will was already preparing to jump between him and Troy, to take the punches if necessary. If he was really smart about this, he could make it look like Mike tried to break up a fight between Will and Troy.

With a sigh of relief though, he noticed how Mike relaxed his shoulders and headed for the bathroom without commenting any



further. Will desperately wanted to talk to him, but he figured, going after his friend would further fuel Troy. He was going to the bathroom, after all, so Will resorted to waiting by his locker.

Troy quickly lost his interest in picking on him when he didn't respond, and Will was inclined to call that a success. The halls were already mostly empty when Mike finally stepped out of the bathroom. Almost everyone had already gone to lunch, and that seemed to be Mike's destination too. Will quickly grabbed his arm, and held him in place though.

„Are you okay?“ he asked, because that was the only question he had been able to think of during the last minutes.

„I'm fine.“ Mike said in a monotone voice that Will didn't like at all. „It's not like this was the first time I had to deal with Troy.“

„Yeah but... you were really close to losing it there.“ Will insisted, remembering Mike's clenched teeth. „You know he's trying to get you to hit him, right?“

„I figured.“ Mike sighed in response. „I'm good. Don't worry. I was told not to get into fights, so I won't. Now if you could just... let me go to lunch.“

He quickly struggled out of Will's grip and hurried off. Will didn't feel like lunch. Not at all. This short talk with Mike had frightened him more than anything his friend had done for the last months. Not because of what he said. He had said what Will had hoped, for the most part. That really wasn't it. It was just that, everything about Mike was dull. Not only his voice, Will could also see it in his eyes. They had looked almost... dry, if that was even possible. Maybe he was imagining things.

*„I was told not to get into fights, so I won't.“*

The sentence echoed in Will's head. It didn't sound like Mike. Thinking about it now, Mike had said a lot of things that hadn't sounded like himself in the rare moments they had spent together since the start of High School.

*„I was told...“*

*„I was told...“*

*„I was told...“*

It had almost always started like this. Sometimes variations like „My dad told me to...“ or „My mom told me to...“, but it had basically always been the same thing.

Will didn't see Mike in any of his classes for the rest of the day, but those words didn't leave his thoughts until he came home.

Even around six in the evening, his head was still filled with assumptions and worries about Mike, up to a point where he was unable to complete his homework. His left leg was twitching nervously, thoughts racing, until he finally decided, he couldn't take it anymore. He'd have to talk to Mike. Right now. Alone. The rest of the party didn't know Mike like Will did. They hadn't known him nearly as long, and none of them seemed to see, something was seriously wrong with him.

Will switched through every channel on his Supercom.

„Mike, are you there? It's Will.“

He was only greeted by silence for the first few minutes. After repeating his message for the tenth time, a voice came crackling through the radio, but it wasn't Mike.

„Dude, forget it.“ Dustin said, mild annoyance in his voice „Mike never picks up these days. He's just too busy.“

„I know.“ Will groaned „That's why I'm trying to reach him. Something's wrong. Something's seriously wrong, and I can't get my mind off it. I just have to talk to him.“

„Yeah well... If you think he needs help or something, go over to his house.“ Dustin sighed. „Gotta keep my radio on because Lucas promised me to help me with that stupid history essay, so I'd appreciate it if you could stay clear of this channel, okay?“

„Okay...“ Will resigned „I guess I'm gonna try my luck at his house then. But I think he isn't supposed to have visitors after six, so...“

„...so you can still leave me alone with it. Sorry dude. Don't wanna sound rude, or uncaring, but I think you're imagining stuff. Just wait for the holidays. He just wants to get good grades, catch up with everything after two years of... you know. Over and out.“

But Will didn't want to wait until the holidays. He couldn't possibly. His mom wasn't home from work yet, so he left a note on the kitchen table, telling her where he was going. He'd probably get in trouble for it, because she was still hesitant to let him out alone in the dark,

but it would be worth it, no matter the outcome. Will just knew, he'd get at least some answers that night.

Will's heart was still pounding heavily from the hasty bike ride when he arrived at the Wheelers' doorstep. He already had his index finger on the doorbell, but stopped dead in his tracks when he heard it. Two voices were fighting a severe argument. They were muffled, too muffled to make out any words, but it sounded like Ted and Karen Wheeler. If that was true, pressing the doorbell was probably a terrible idea right now. Will's shoulders lumped. He wouldn't get to talk to Mike that night. Dustin had been right. He'd wait for the holidays, and maybe a sleepover. Except...

There was the garage. The garage with the door that led directly to the basement. From there, it would be the easiest thing in the world to sneak upstairs to Mike's room. Objectively speaking, breaking into the house was a terrible idea, one that could get him in more trouble than he had ever been in, but it would be worth the risk.

Will made his way around the house, quieter than necessary considering the volume of the argument going on inside, and tip-toed through the garage. The door wasn't locked. Will just couldn't believe his luck.

The basement looked the same as always. It had been a few weeks since he had been there, but everything seemed to be in order. Will was grateful for the running washing machine, that drowned out his footsteps. He snuck up the stairs but remained behind the closed door, now able to understand what the Wheeler parents were arguing about.

„So you don't even care he's probably able to hear every word you're saying, Karen?“

„No! He’s supposed to hear! Maybe that will make it better!“

A loud knock, as if someone had slammed his fist on a table, startled Will slightly.

„I don’t get what you want! He doesn’t act up. He doesn’t talk back. He does his homework. He finally removed all this fairytale-nonsense from his room! What more could we ask for?“

„He doesn’t have a mind of his own! I should have never agreed to this, Ted!“

„Well, too bad, you did, and now you’re not even satisfied with the best possible outcome!“

„The best? The best?“

Karen Wheeler’s voice was almost hysterical.

„When was the last time you’ve seen one of his friends around here, Ted? It’s not healthy! Have you ever even looked at Michael, I mean, really looked at him? When was the last time you’ve seen him smile?“

„When was the last time you saw me smile? That’s not what this world is about! Do you think I got us this house by smiling at people?“

Ted Wheeler sounded triumphant.

„So everyone’s just got to be as miserable as you are?“

„What do you want from me, Karen? You want me to leave? Fine! I’m leaving!“

„Yeah, that’s like you! You don’t talk to your son for years, you f... you mess him up so bad I don’t even recognize him anymore, then you just run away from the consequences.“

„He’s not messed up, Karen! Compare his new self to him a year ago!“

„It’s not a ‚new self‘, Ted. This place... I don’t know what they did, but they made him something he isn’t. That’s not how a fourteen year old should behave! He’s just not my son anymore!“

Will could hear footsteps coming closer to the door. With rising panic, he realized, the washing machine had stopped. When he heard Mike’s father screaming again, he made his move and quickly, but as quietly as possible, hurried down the stairs.

„Where do you think you’re going?“

„I’m getting the laundry! Someone has to do the work around the house, right? And you’re right, you should leave, Theodore.“

Will had barely managed to hide under the stairs when Mike’s mother came down to the basement and began fiddling with the

washing machine. Occasionally, he peeked around his cover to look at her. Even from behind it wasn't hard to see how violently she was trembling. This trembling only increased when an engine roared in the garage. Only after Ted Wheeler had pulled out of the driveway, she broke down in tears.

Will watched, or rather, listened to the whole scene with growing discomfort. He had invaded a private moment and probably witnessed the Wheelers' first step towards divorce. It wasn't right, but through all the guilt he felt over his deceitfulness, there was a small hint of relief. He wasn't crazy. He wasn't imagining things. Karen Wheeler had managed to pinpoint exactly what Will had been feeling for weeks.

*„...something he isn't.“*

Exactly that. Mike had become somewhat of a zombie. Will couldn't have put it any other way. There was frighteningly little left of his best friend, but now that he knew he wasn't the only one to notice, he was all the more determined to fix that. Just thinking about what Mike must have went through at that camp made Will's insides clench painfully. For a moment, he wanted to step out from behind the stairs and talk to Mike's mother, tell her he had noticed it too. But what was he supposed to say?

*„Hello, Mrs. Wheeler. I just broke into your house and overheard your argument with your husband. I'm sorry he's gone by the way. Anyways, I completely agree with you, Mike hasn't changed for the better. Any idea how we could handle this?“*

No, this was not going to happen, as much as he wanted someone on his side. He'd just have to sit it out until he could leave the Wheeler

house and then probably wait for a chance to get some private time with Mike during the holidays.



## 6. Chapter 6

### Notes for the Chapter:

Very short chapter ahead.  
Last one will be a bit longer.

Btw, is Joyce drunk? I honestly don't know.

„Will, sweetie?“

„Mom! I'm not five!“ Will complained.

He hated being called ‚sweetie‘, or ‚honey‘, or anything in between.

„You're right, I'm sorry.“ his mom sighed „Will, dude?“

Who would have thought she could ever become so awkward? Maybe it had something to do with Jonathan leaving.

„You're not making it better!“ he groaned „Just... tell me what's going on, okay?“

It was the last weekend before the holidays, and Will had at least a vague idea of what this could be about. As far as he had heard, Karen Wheeler had called just ten minutes ago.

„Mike's mom called.“ his mother confirmed „Is it okay if Mike stays with us for the weekend? She's got some... business to take care off.“

„Is it be...“ Will started, but remembered he shouldn't even know about the divorce, if it was really happening.

„Is it okay with you?“ he quickly said, not to raise suspicion.

„I wouldn't have asked you if it wasn't.“ she laughed „I'm gonna tell Karen it's alright then. She said she could drop him off by eight.“

„Cool.“ Will said, trying to play down his excitement. „I'm gonna prepare snacks.“

„I could call Claudia and Bridget too, to see if Dustin and Lucas want to come, is that alright? I don't know how I can reach Max's parents though, so Lucas might want...“

„Mom!“ Will said, running after her „Could you... I mean... could you not call them?“

His mom frowned.

„What's wrong? Did you get into an argument or something? As far as I remember you always loved having all your friends around.“

„We're fine. Really.“ Will insisted „It's just that... I could catch up on some homework for the last time before the holidays, and I think Mike wants that too. I mean, they can come over tomorrow but tonight we might just... you know... want to have some peace and quiet. Dustin and Lucas aren't as behind as I am.“

„Well, you could really use better grades.“ she huffed, not without a

hint of humor „Good idea, actually. We're calling them tomorrow then, okay?“

The gaze she gave Will startled him for a second. A compassionate, almost knowing smile played around her lips, but he brushed it off in his mind. She couldn't possibly know what was going on.

„Okay.“

Secretly, he cheered like he hadn't cheered in months. He wouldn't have to look for an opportunity to talk to Mike alone. There it was, presented to him on a silver plate. Now he'd just have to find the right words. He peeked at the clock. Two hours.

Lost in thought, Will rummaged through the kitchen shelves until he found a few bags of chips. They would have to suffice. He picked out two large bowls and set them on the kitchen table, before he gazed over at the window for just a second, more out of habit, than anything else. The sight captivated him, though.

It had started to snow for the first time that year. Thick, white flakes were tumbling down from the dark sky. For the last two years, snow had always reminded him of the harsh, cold air and ground in the so called ‚Upside Down‘ he'd had to endure for a week, but now, things were different. Will couldn't make out why, but the snow meant hope to him. He'd talk to Mike, really talk to Mike. He would make things better. That's what he promised himself.

He sighed as he stepped outside without a jacket or boots on. Will let the cold, stinging air engulf him, clearing his mind of any unnecessary thought. This was good. Better than good. Thinking became so easy! It hurt his body, but his mind was clear.

*Try to get him to start the conversation. That would make it easier. No pressure.*

*If he doesn't open up until midnight, you're gonna ask him.*

That was pretty much all he could think of. No certain phrase, or sentence he could use to get through the shell that had hidden Mike from him lately.

Will spent a good ten minutes in the cold, before his mom found him, dragged him inside and scolded him. He didn't care too much.

## 7. Chapter 7

A cold winter night, hot chocolate, blankets, snacks, and Star Wars on VHS. Will would have considered this the perfect evening a year earlier. Now, though, he was more anxious than relaxed. His gaze constantly wandered from the TV to Mike, then back to the TV, occasionally to his mom. Even before they had started the movie, he had asked himself why she didn't insist on the boys completing their homework first. The compassionate smiles she gave him from time to time confirmed his suspicion that she knew at least something.

Of course, if she was half the mother Karen Wheeler was, she had noticed Mike's behavior by now. Will became more and more convinced, mothers have a sense for these things.

Every time he looked at Mike, who stared at the TV with a blank expression, his heart ached at the sight of those dull eyes. Will would even prefer the somewhat aggressive, school skipping troublemaker Mike over this version of him, that, according to Mrs. Wheeler, wasn't really him at all. At least that Mike had showed emotion. He had laughed at R2D2 calling C-3PO a mindless philosopher. He had clenched his fists at the injustice of Tarkin blowing up Alderaan, even after the twentieth time of seeing the movie. That was just Mike, but now, there was nothing left of that. It looked more like he acknowledged what was happening on the screen at best.

Will thought back to ‚Back to the Future‘, near the end of summer. Mike had smiled. He had laughed, occasionally. Had he faked it? Or had he gotten even worse since then?

He was still busy with these thoughts when the end credits were rolling.

„Wanna go to my room?“ he asked.

Mike just shrugged in response and mumbled

„Sure.“

„Let's take the chips.“ Will said, picking up the two large bowls.

He had eaten most of his, but Mike's was just as full as the moment Will had handed it to him. At least, he had emptied his hot chocolate.

Will couldn't help but notice how Mike flinched at the sound of the door closing. He had probably slammed it shut just a little bit too loudly. Finally, they were alone. Will quickly sat down on his bed, folding his legs in front of himself, while Mike just stood there, looking completely lost.

„You... don't wanna sit down?“

„Uh... sorry.“ he mumbled, climbing onto the mattress, facing Will.

„Chips? You haven't touched them once, have you?“

„N... no thanks. I'm pretty full from dinner.“

„You know... I was thinking.“ Will started, hopefully getting Mike's curiosity „We haven't played D&D in months. But Dustin and Lucas, maybe even Max, will be coming over tomorrow so... maybe we could go for a campaign. I wrote one, you know.“

„You did?“ Mike asked, a hint of surprise piercing through his stone cold face.

„Well, you didn't.“ Will said „It's probably not as good as the stuff you always wrote for us, but it'll do. What do you say?“

.. - - - - - . - - - - - . - - - - - . - - - - - .

„Wheeler! Why are you here?“

*Mike felt himself nearly crushed by the weight of the log he and five others were carrying on their shoulders. He didn't even hear the question the first time.*

„Why are you here, Wheeler?“

*This time, it was impossible to overhear it, as it almost pierced his eardrum.*

„Sir... got into a fight... Sir.“

*He barely managed to croak the words, but the ‚counselor‘ wouldn't have it.*

„You're here because you're a burden! You're here because you single-handedly brought your family to the verge of collapse! Never again! Do you understand?“

„Sir... yes... Sir...“





leaving Mike with his cold expression, and Will with a terrible feeling of loss. He had been close, but it hadn't quite worked.

„Okay.“ he sighed „I think that could be fun. I bet you're a good Dungeon Master.“

Will forced a smile, and leaned against the headboard.

„Now, we just gotta find a way to keep ourselves busy until then, right?“

He clapped his hands, grinning maybe a bit too enthusiastically.

„Right.“ Mike said quietly, staring at a point somewhere next to Will's face.

Will tried to remember if Mike had ever looked at him directly since August, honestly, like he had before the camp, but he couldn't think of a single occasion on which he had. He had always been fixated on something just behind Will, as if he didn't want him to notice he couldn't look him in the eyes.

An uncomfortable silence ensued. Before the summer, Mike wouldn't have let this happen. He would have come up with something, anything, to make things more comfortable. Actually, uncomfortable moments had been close to impossible between Will and Mike. Will didn't even know he could feel this way around a person he had known for more than half his life. Around someone he considered family. Still, he didn't know what to do or say.

Mike stared at nothing.

Will stared at his alarm clock, watching the minutes fly by.

Time was moving fast. Too fast. Only after half an hour he managed to turn his gaze back to Mike. He was still mustering the same, dull expression, but Will couldn't get his eyes off of his friend.

His heart rate increased. Rage was building up. The corners of his eyes were stinging. All while one thought hammered in his head:

*This isn't right! He's so empty!*

Had he waited longer, he would have broken down, or started yelling. His mom was already asleep, so it was safe to play his last card. But not here. Not in his bedroom.

Will jumped up from the bed, and Mike's gaze lazily followed him.

„Come. Put your jacket on. We're going outside.“ Will said, as firmly as he possibly could.

„Why?“ Mike asked slowly. „It's... cold. I thought you don't like...“

„I'm over it.“ Will insisted. „Follow me.“

Mike did follow, without another word of protest and a minute later, their shoes left footprints in the thin layer of snow that had fallen since the late afternoon. Their breath produced short-lived white clouds in the air.

„Castle Byers.“ Will said.

Mike left it uncommented. The last thing Jonathan and Will had done together during the summer was the improvement of Castle Byers. Now, it could withstand rain, snow, maybe even a hurricane, though Will wouldn't bet his life on it. The important thing was, it was dry. Dry, but cold, exactly what they needed now.

Will sat down inside, patting on the floor next to him, where Mike hesitantly dropped.

„Could you tell me wh...“ he muttered, but Will cut him off.

„I found something out about myself today, you know.“ he quietly said „Wanna hear what?“

„What?“

„It's true, I still hate the cold... but it makes thinking easy. You know, when I was trapped in there... I could think so clearly. I kinda... always knew what I had to do to survive. Until today, I didn't even know it was because of the cold, but I think it was. The only reason it got me in the end was that I was so weak.“

„Okay.“ Mike mumbled „I don't know where you're going with this but...“

„It made thinking so easy, I could just... shut off from time to time. Just think about what always made me happy. I wouldn't have survived without that.“

Will choked up the last few words, and hastily wiped the tears from his eyes before Mike could see them. They were sitting next to each other, both staring at the old curtain that covered the entrance, but even if Mike had looked at him, it would have been too dark to see the little drops on Will's face. He listened to the noises of the woods around him, to Mike's flat breathing, and concentrated on staying as quiet as he possibly could, to notice any shift in Mike's behavior.

„Can you tell me about something that makes you happy?“ he asked. „Shouldn't be too hard, right? Especially out here.“

Mike remained silent. Maybe a good sign. At least, he didn't lie. He probably couldn't even think of something to say. The way he was shifting around nervously told Will, he was on the right way to getting through.

„I came by your house two weeks ago to check up on you.“ Will went on, suddenly convinced this was the right way to go. „I heard voices, so I didn't ring. I kinda didn't want to talk to your parents, so I snuck in through the garage and... from the basement steps I heard them fighting. I bet you heard that too, right?“

„That was... when... my dad...“ Mike pressed through his teeth, suddenly shaking heavily.

Will put his left arm around him, but didn't stop talking.

„Yeah, when he left. He was already gone when I got a chance to sneak back out. But I think what your mom said was way more important anyways. About how you've changed. Or how you've been changed.“

Mike was now struggling weakly to get out of Will's grip, but he just reacted by wrapping his other arm around his friend, holding him

even tighter. His heart was hammering so violently, he could almost hear it jumping against his ribs.

„You're not yourself, Mike.“ he said, convinced he'd have to fight the tears for at least a few more moments.

Mike shook his head vehemently.

„I need them... can't drag them down... ungrateful... always ungrateful...“ he began stuttering more to himself than to Will.

It almost sounded like a sick mantra of self-loathing.

„No right... have to make up for things... worried too much already... pathetic...“

„Mike... you're wrong. You were just hurting, but your dad, he was... I think he was lazy. Or he didn't care. So he just sent you away to that... that place... It's always been like this, remember? You even told me from time to time, he only noticed you when you got into trouble.“

It was the last thing Will managed to say without being interrupted by his tears, but to his relief, he had done it.

Next to him, the floodgates finally opened and Mike stopped his chanting and struggling. Instead, all the built up emotion erupted from him like a volcano of bitterness and salty tears, and Will knew he could take it all in, if necessary.

„I’m just a... a monumental failure!“ Mike sobbed into the crook of his neck. „I just made you all miserable for years, and now look what I’ve done!“

„What do you mean?“ Will asked through his own crying, his heart close to exploding from the confusing mix of relief and bitterness.

„I’ve dragged them down with me! My whole family! I fucked them up so bad, they’re breaking apart!“

His shaking and sobbing became so violent, Will didn’t answer for a minute. Instead, he just cradled Mike in his arms to help him through the worst, biting his own lip painfully hard. The hot tears quickly became cold and froze against Will’s neck. Just as he thought he could go on, Mike all but yelled

„Why didn’t it help me? They said it would help me get better! But they were just... screaming all the time and... and... they...“

„It was supposed to help your dad. Not you. He just wanted to take the easy way.“ Will quietly responded, while running his hand up and down Mike’s shaking back, who, in turn, pulled Will so close to him, it almost hurt.

„They’d be better off without me! You’d all be! I can’t do anything right. It’s just... one disappointment after the other! No matter how hard I try... I’m just a burden you all have to drag along!“

The tears just wouldn’t stop, but Will didn’t pressure Mike. The words hurt him more than anything Mike had done, or not done, during the last months. He had to get everything out first though, then they could start rebuilding.

„Mike...“ he hushed into his ear „You don't even know how much we all need you, do you?“

„You don't...“ Mike whispered hoarsely, hiccups accomplishing every word „I just... I just cause misery wherever I go!“

„Is that why you haven't talked to your mom yet? You heard the argument too, didn't you?“

Will could feel Mike nod against his neck, and whispered

„But you know she wants you back, right? I mean, the real you. And I want you back too. Please just... I don't even know what I want you to do...“

Now it was Will's turn to pull Mike closer.

„I can't talk to her! I'd just make it worse! When I hear her crying at night, and I know it's my fault, I just... want to... I think I shouldn't be here!“ he sobbed, sending Will into a turmoil of fear and adrenaline.

What was he suggesting?

„Mike... you're scaring me.“ Will shakily whispered „Don't do anything stupid, okay? Mike, you have to promise!“

Mike hesitated, but nodded again. That was good enough for Will. A promise was still a promise, and he trusted Mike with it.

„Wanna know something I haven't told anyone yet?“ he asked, a small smile playing around his lips.

„Okay...“ Mike weakly croaked.

„At that place, out of all people I know... I thought about you the most.“ Will sighed „So, don't ever think we don't need you. Truth is... I needed you back then, and I need you now, as much as ever.“

Another sob, loud and wet, erupted from Mike, while Will began running his right hand through his friend's way too short hair.

„I think I need you more than any person in the world. But I've lost you.“

Mike whimpered at that, his shoulders heaving and dropping rhythmically.

„I'm... sorry... I'm sorry...“ he repeated over and over, before Will stopped him.

„Stop with the apologies! Please! You've always been there for me.“ Will insisted, with as much firmness as he could still muster „Just... think about kindergarten... Elementary School... Middle School. Whenever I got in trouble, you were there. I can't even say how many punches you've taken for me. Please, just let me help you for once.“

His friend took a few, deep breaths, calming himself down just enough to sigh



„Okay. I’m s... I mean... just okay. I trust you.“

„That’s good.“ Will said quietly, still shaken up, but getting better.  
„Let’s start by going inside, okay?“

They did just that. The warmth of the small house was welcoming and relaxing to both of them, but it was only when they came back to Will’s brightly lit room, he saw Mike’s swollen, red eyes. His heart practically made a backflip in his chest. They weren’t dull. Nothing about Mike was still dull. Will could see he was broken, everything that had once made up his personality had been shattered to pieces, but that was okay. It would just take some super glue and a bit of patience to put everything back together, and maybe make it even stronger.

After changing into his pyjamas, Will crawled into his bed and patted the mattress next to him. Mike hesitantly joined him, and quickly relaxed when Will extended his arm, allowing Mike to rest his head against his shoulder. The heat he radiated was soothing, wonderfully calm and familiar to Will.

„Remember the day we first met?“ he asked, his voice only a faint whisper.

Mike made a noise, somewhere between weak laughter and dry sobbing.

„Yeah...“ he whispered back „You were alone on the swing on the first day of kindergarten... and I asked if you wanted to be my friend. And you just said...“

„...yes.“ Will completed it for him „Just keep thinking about that,

okay?"

„Okay.“ Mike sniffed, already drifting off to sleep.

## Notes for the Chapter:

So... that's it.

I really hope some of you enjoyed it. I'm really sorry about how much Mike had to suffer in this. I know, I tagged 'Angst with a Happy Ending' and though not all is well, I think the ending is happy. At least somewhat happy.

Phew... my babies need a break now.